

Roll Call, May 19, 2004

Retired Rear Adm. James Carey is on a mission.

As chairman of the National Defense Political Action Committee, he's executing war plans to try to boost the number of military veterans serving in Congress.

"We want more people who've slept in a foxhole ... someone who knows what it's like to stand watch 18 hours a day when you're 60 days at sea," says Carey, a decorated Vietnam War veteran who went on to become vice chairman of the U.S. Federal Maritime Commission in the 1980s.

By all accounts, Members with military experience are a vanishing breed.

While the percentage of veterans in Congress in the 1970s was the highest in U.S. history — in 1971, 75 percent of all House lawmakers had served in the military due in large part to World War II and the Korean War — today the number of veterans serving in both the Senate and House has plummeted to around 31 percent.

According to the House Veterans Affairs Committee, there are 167 lawmakers on Capitol Hill with military experience — 128 in the House and 39 in the Senate — but Carey said he and many of his comrades would like to see more people who've served in the military.

He's not alone.

University of Maine Law School professor Donald Zillman, who once served as a distinguished visiting professor at West Point and was a member of the Army Judge Advocate General Corps, recently called the 108th Congress the "least militarily connected Congress in decades."

The implications, he wrote, are staggering — especially now.

“The legislator who has commanded a small unit in battle, flown combat missions, organized medical care for mass casualties or shipped supplies to a war zone possess valuable practical insights for a Congress that will guide the war on terrorism and ... [the] war with Iraq,” Zillman wrote in a press release for the university.

He noted that military veterans can help to educate their non-veteran colleagues on issues of military importance and serve as a reality check for organization and individuals trying to influence these policy areas.

Rep. Rob Simmons (R-Conn.), a member of the Armed Services Committee, told the Armed Forces Journal in 2002 that his military service made his job in Congress easier.

“As you know I sit on the Armed Forces readiness subcommittee,” he said. “Recently, we had to discuss environmental issues facing our military in various ‘hot spots.’ I called upon my experience in the Army and the [CIA] to give me a better understanding in knowing what our military forces are going to face, to set forth realistic training requirements and make sound decisions.”

In his 1997 book “Making the Corps,” Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas Ricks touted the importance of military experience in the legislative process — but noted that it is sadly lacking.

“For most [Members of Congress], what they know of the military is what they saw on television during the [first] Gulf War. They took two lessons away from that war; that high-technology works, and that the U.S. needs missile defenses. ... The Congress didn’t come away from watching the war with much interest in training or personnel issues or ground forces in general.”

What lessons lawmakers take from the war in Iraq remain to be seen — but Carey believes that policymakers need a deeper understanding of military issues that goes beyond defense budgets.

In particular, he is concerned about the post-war experiences that thousands of military personnel will face when they come home from Iraq — reservists who've lost their homes to bankruptcy because of the pay cuts they've had to endure, or those who have missed out on important advancement opportunities in their civilian careers.

Carey said he conceived the idea for the National Defense PAC in 2000 while he was “grousing” with a few buddies over beers about the fact that so many people on Capitol Hill “who had never slept in a foxhole half-filled with water” were making decisions about soldiers’ leaky boots.

Instead of just complaining, “we decided to go and do something about it,” Carey said.

In 2000, as 10 of the group’s 11 endorsed candidates — including now-Reps. Simmons, Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Ed Schrock (R-Va.) — won seats in Congress, Carey learned that the name National Defense PAC really resonated with voters.

Endorsements, he explained, are the primary contribution that the PAC makes to candidates. Actual financial contributions are harder to come by — the group has raised about \$30,000 for the 2004 election cycle and makes hard-dollar contributions to campaigns sparingly, particularly if a candidate appears to have little chance of winning.

“You never go into a battle you know up front you’re going to lose,” Carey imparts.

In 2002, 56 of the PAC’s 65 endorsed candidates — the group supported incumbents and non-incumbents, Republicans and Democrats — were successful.

This year, the group hopes to endorse 100 candidates. Among the early recruits are California Republican Tim Escobar, who is seeking a rematch with Rep. Linda Sanchez (D).

“He has served our country in America’s armed forces, he knows the hardships and dangers of

military service first hand, and he's committed to keeping the promises made to our veterans when they first agreed to risk their lives to face America's enemies," a National Defense PAC news release put out last week said. "He's already walked in their shoes and understands what it takes to train and fight and win."

Escobar, who has served in the Army and Army Reserves since 1985, has built much of his campaign platform around the premise that he is, in his heart of hearts, a citizen soldier.

"That is why I will be working to improve funding for veterans' health care, to ensure access to the VA health care system and to provide fair and equitable coverage for military retirees and disabled veterans," Escobar told voters in the 39th district of California, home to 30,881 military veterans, when he announced his bid for Congress.

In North Dakota, Republican Duane Sand is hoping he will garner the National Defense PAC's support once again — he had the group's backing during his unsuccessful Senate bid in 2000 — as he looks to upset six-term incumbent Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D).

"I believe that veteran representation is at a historic low at one of the worst times in the history of America," Sand explained in an interview. "America really needs new breeds of Congressmen and Congresswomen — people from all over the country better prepared and better equipped to decide on security issues in the [face of] terrorism."

The 38-year-old former Navy submarine officer emphasized that his military experience is something that "reaches across party lines" and is critical in addressing the two key issues facing the country — the economy and the war on terror — and critical issues facing North Dakotans, including the potential closings of military bases in Grand Forks and Minot.

It's a theme that resonates in his television advertisements and on his campaign Web site and has helped him garner contributions from other military veterans in 32 states.

One bio spot put together by Wilson-Grand Communications features numerous shots of Sand in uniform at various points in his military career.

“I’m Duane Sand. Service to country is in my blood. I felt a strong commitment to my country very early in life and it’s never gone away,” Sand narrates, while patriotic music plays in the background and images of the American flag float across the television screen.

“Admiral Carey — who I know through my 2000 race — is an outstanding guy on a very important mission and it does mean a lot to us,” Sand says.

That said, getting an endorsement from the National Defense PAC isn’t a cakewalk.

Carey says his group first asks candidates to respond to a “yes” or “no” set of “vetting questions” and then reviews incumbents’ voting records to make sure that their records correspond with their answers.

After that, it’s pretty much just “swag,” Carey said.

Swag?

That’s military jargon for “scientific wild ass guess,” the admiral explains.